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SIPDIS

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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: VATICAN NAMES CONTROVERSIAL PRELATE TO HEAD ARCHDIOCESE OF KINSHASA

REF: (A) 06 Kinshasa 785; (B) 06 Kinshasa 834; (C) 06 Kinshasa 1746; (D) 06 Kinshasa 1766

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED -- PROTECT ACCORDINGLY

11. (SBU) Summary: The Holy See has named Laurent Monsengwo, Archbishop of Kisangani and president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (CENCO), to become the new Archbishop of Kinshasa. He succeeds the late Frederic Cardinal Etsou. Monsengwo is known for keen intelligence, strong political skills and great ambition. His talents will be tested as he leads the Congolese Catholic Church in a challenging period of reconstruction and competition. End summary.

12. (SBU) The acting papal nuncio in Kinshasa, the Vatican's diplomatic representative in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, announced December 5 that Archbishop Laurent Monsengwo, currently serving as Archbishop of Kisangani, has been named by Pope Benedict XVI as Archbishop of Kinshasa. Monsengwo succeeds Frederic Cardinal Etsou, who died in January following a long illness. He will be formally installed in February.

13. (U) Laurent Monsengwo Pasinya was born in October, 1939 in Inongo, province of Bandundu. A Sakata tribesman of the Nsontin royal family, he is a nephew of former Prime Minister Joseph Nsinga. His brother is Senator Francois Kaniki, a former CEO of the shipping firm AGETRAF. Monsengwo holds a doctorate in biblical exegesis and speaks several languages, including Hebrew. He was ordained in 1963. He was named auxiliary bishop of Inongo in 1980, then of Kisangani from 1981 to 1988. He became archbishop of Kisangani in 1988.

14. (U) From 1976 to 1980 Monsengwo served as secretary general of the National Catholic Conference of Bishops (CENCO), and later as its president, from 1984 to 1992. He also headed the Consortium of Bishops' Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SCEAM) for six years. Monsengwo is again president of CENCO and, since May 2007, heads Pax Christi International, a Brussels-based international Roman Catholic NGO that supports projects throughout the world that promote peace and understanding.

15. (SBU) Monsengwo gained popularity in the early 1990's for a letter he wrote denouncing Mobutu's rule. He was elected president of the 1991-1992 National Sovereign Conference which, many Congolese hoped, would lead the country from the Mobutu dictatorship to democratic rule. Frequent visits with Mobutu at his home in Gbadolite, however, raised questions about Monsengwo's real political loyalties. Later, during the pre-electoral period in 2006, his calls for all candidates to affirm their support for pre-election power-sharing "negotiations" were widely seen as moves to support Jean-Pierre Bemba's political ambitions (refs A, B). Some reports allege that he acted behind the scenes on behalf of Bemba's candidacy. There are also reports that Monsengwo was behind Cardinal Etsou's controversial statements in 2006 questioning the

legitimacy of Kabila's election (refs C, D).

¶6. (SBU) Comment: Many believe Monsengwo has had the Kinshasa see in his sights for many years. Like his two predecessors, he should eventually be named cardinal, although precedent indicates that getting the scarlet beret requires at least tacit approval from President Kabila. The fact that an older prelate was chosen (Monsengwo is in his late sixties) as de facto leader of the Congo's estimated 30 million-plus Catholics (although technically the archbishop of Kinshasa only, his proximity to the national power center gives him the potential to be the most influential churchman throughout the country) suggests that Rome has opted for a well-known quantity at a time of both great opportunity and great peril for the Congolese Church. Monsengwo's intellect, energy, determination and ambition will be put to the test as he works to rebuild the Church after the country's long winter of civil and regional wars, and to confront the growing challenge posed by foreign Protestant and home-grown Congolese Christian movements. His political skills will also be tested, as he maneuvers to rebuild bridges to a president he reportedly opposed prior to the 2006 elections. Alternatively, he could leverage his reputation as an anti-Kabila activist to win support from those discontented with Kabila and his governing coalition. End comment.

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